

禪

CH'AN

NEWSLETTER

No. 38 July, 1984

SELECTING AND STUDYING UNDER A MASTER

Lecture Given by Master Sheng-Yen, Sunday, July 8, 1984

Sakyamuni Buddha once remarked that the depth of a Buddha's wisdom and the extent of his merit are ascertainable only by one who has himself reached Buddhahood. It is similarly true that the practice of a master can be assessed only by who one is himself a master. A student, consequently, cannot measure the extent of a master's attainment. The most he can do is to acquaint himself with the correct view of Buddhadharma and be certain that the master teaches this view.

Three fundamental principles make up the right view of Buddhadharma. They are the principles of causes and conditions, of causes and consequences and of the middle way, this last being the path between extremes. Let us examine each of these. Buddhadharma explains that all things, being illusory and without self-nature, are utterly dependent on causes and conditions for their appearance. Cause and consequence are said to be inextricably related over time, such that no action in the past, present or future can be separated from its corresponding cause and consequence. Further, all extremes, such as the clinging to emptiness or existence, are false and erroneous, and thus the only recourse is said to be the middle path, which remains free from all extremes.

The student must be wary of false views. Some teachers hold that there are eternally existent dharmas (phenomena). Theists, for instance, hold that there exists an eternal soul perpetually under the jurisdiction of an eternal God. Others believe that the dharmas of cause and effect are unrelated through time. They say that events occur only randomly. Materialists admit cause and effect only in relation to actions within the physical world, where the relationship between an effect and its cause is experimentally verifiable. But they deny the notion of a karmic law of cause and effect that rules all planes of existence, not just the physical.

Any master whose teachings are consistent with this correct view of Buddhadharma must be considered to have met at least the minimum requirement of the true master. Hence, in selecting a master students should concern themselves only with correct view. They should not bother about the master's character and conduct.

But usually they do. Typically the student, before all else, judges the master by his teachings, watching with an eagle eye for any inconsistencies between the master's teachings and actions. This causes problems. If there is any discrepancy between the master's avowed standards and what the master himself does, then the practitioner gradually comes to perceive only the master's failings and ultimately despairs of the teachings he has received. So not only does he never actually practice, but he also loses all faith in the practice as well.

The master is always subject to criticism by his disciples. Because he is enlightened, he does not need to remain in society, but he does so for the good of those mired in delusion. While functioning in society, he will necessarily betray his weaknesses. Like anyone else, he must eat, urinate, defecate, wear clothes and walk down the street. As a result many people look at masters in astonishment. They exclaim, "My God! He eats food! How could he be a real master since he eats food just as we do? He goes to the bathroom just like us! How could he be exactly like us?"

Although a master may appear to suffer from the same failings as his disciples, it should be remembered that the mind of the master is ever pure. Were it impure, there would undoubtedly be defects in his teaching of the Dharma.

Masters belonging to some religions prefer to hide their personal lives. You will never see them sleeping, eating, or using the bathroom. The master is only seen sitting in a nice place, wearing the most magnificent robes, looking quite splendid, pure and somber. He looks like God's representative.

I often say that you should never think of me as God or as a bodhisattva. I am exactly the same as all the rest of you. I eat food when I am hungry. I also sleep like anyone else. In fact, I believe that I snore, but I am not certain since I cannot listen to myself while sleeping.

Once in the last retreat while everyone was participating in the evening service, I went to pick up one of the implements for use in the ceremony, but because I was feeling very exhausted, I dropped it. My thought at that time was that it is definitely best not to be a master once you have grown old, because the body ceases to listen to the commands of the mind. If disciples see apparent carelessness in their master, they will proceed to imitate this fault. Of course, if while doing the Mengshan Food Ceremony everyone started dropping things and making mistakes, I would become very cross. I can make mistakes. But that is my privilege, and my disciples do not share it.

Even if the master tells lies, steals, or chases women though knowing perfectly well that such actions are contrary to the Vinaya (the canon of Buddhist precepts) -- indeed, even if he does so in full view of his disciples -- he is still to be considered a true master as long as he scolds his disciples if they too commit transgressions. Such a master will undoubtedly reap the bad consequences of his transgressions. But this is his concern and no one else's.

Most disciples cannot understand this, so trouble arises. It is worst for those disciples who are completely blind to the purpose of practice and who study with the master only because others do. Instead of paying attention to the master's teaching, they focus on his conduct and imitate it. If the master breaks certain precepts, so do they. The difference is that they carry their infractions far beyond those of the master. Thus if the master transgresses the Vinaya 50% of the time, they will do so 60% of the time. If the master curses someone, these disciples will immediately begin cursing others. If the master insists that, unlike himself, his disciples are not permitted to commit wrongs, then these disciples will proceed to say, "I can do this, but you others cannot." Blind and directionless, they do not grasp the correct view and their load of bad karma grows heavier.

The moral problems that we now hear about regarding Buddhist students and masters in the United States are not unprecedented. These have occurred since the time of Sakyamuni Buddha. During the lifetime of the Buddha, for example, there lived a man called Devadatta whose prescriptions for the Vinaya were even stricter than those of Sakyamuni and who himself possessed a large following. He accused the Buddha of laxity.

Which man's teaching was right? It is a question of correct view. Sakyamuni neither forbade nor promoted the bitter ascetic practices of Devadatta. He said only that the ascetic life is useful for minds mired in obscurations but that it is purposeless in other instances. Sakyamuni's view, then, was centered in the middle way: indulging neither in the extreme of asceticism nor in that of epicurianism. Devadatta's view, however, fell into the extreme of rigid asceticism. From the perspective of correct view, it is therefore Sakyamuni's standpoint which is preferable.

Throughout the history of Buddhism, there have been frequent debates about which is more important: holding of the correct view or keeping to the precepts. There is an aphorism in the Ch'an Sect that instructs the practitioner to prize the correct view above all and to be relaxed about the precepts. If a student were to put this into practice, he would probably break many precepts. This would be incorrect. Instead, the attitude suggested by this aphorism is meant to be adopted only in relation to the master: the student should treasure the master's teachings, but wink at any of his failings in conduct.

A master's misdemeanors are symptoms of his own weakness or illness. The disciple should not desire to contract such illness. The student should desire only to find a master whose teaching is in accord with the Buddhadharma. It is thereafter the student's duty to apply the teaching to his life, and to his life alone. If he accomplishes this, he will have achieved much.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The annual membership meeting was held on July 15. New members were welcomed into the Center and the events of a successful year were reviewed.

A beginners' class was held on July 21. If anyone needs information on upcoming events, please contact the Center.

There was a party on July 26 at the Hunan Pan Restaurant. It was held to wish Ernie Heau well before his departure and to welcome Ching-Hai Shih to the Center.

Shih-fu returned to Taiwan on July 29 for three months.



The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.

CH'AN CENTER
Institute of Chung-Hwa
Buddhist Culture
90-31 Corona Avenue
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
FLUSHING, N.Y.
PERMIT NO. 1120

RETURN POSTAGE
GUARANTEED